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Engaging with “webness” in online reflective writing practices

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Abstract: This article argues that online reflective practices in higher education produce tensions around ownership, control and safety. Reflective writing pedagogies, commonly grounded in a humanist philosophical tradition, often value coherence and authenticity. Writing online, however, opens students and teachers to the sorts of questions and uncertainties about subjectivity, ownership of data, privacy and disclosure that characterize the online context. This is the case no matter how much teachers try to protect students or deny the ‘webness’ of their reflective practices. The article draws on qualitative data from interviews with students and teachers in higher education in the United Kingdom. It argues that engaging with digital traces calls for a different approach to reflection, and proposes the “placeholder” as a way to privilege fragments, speed and remixability in a reflective writing context.

Keywords: online reflective writing; database; subjectivity; remix; placeholder; control; ownership; blog; e-portfolio; humanism

1. Introduction

This article draws on data from interviews with students and teachers in professional higher education programs in the United Kingdom to show how a humanist foundation of reflective writing is problematized by online reflection, and to explore how an alternative philosophical

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position might lead to more generative digital reflective writing practices. Students and teachers spoke with me in detail about how it was to write reflectively online and to engage with this writing; how they thought about online reflection in terms of audience, ownership, disclosure and privacy; and what sorts of identities emerge in reflective writing, and data from these interviews is discussed here.

Humanist assumptions about individual purposefulness, unity, authenticity, and coherence of identity, and how these qualities can be articulated, are dominant in pedagogies of reflection (Fenwick, 2000), and have already been identified and critiqued in the context of reflective writing. For example, Lynn Fendler's (2003) analysis of the various meanings of reflection ultimately ties reflective practices to Foucauldian neo-liberal governmentality, where governing power is de-centred and located within individuals, who become responsible for their own surveillance (Lemke, 2001). Tony Gilbert (2001) maintains that it is disingenuous to speak of autonomous, pure, critical selves emerging from practices which demand confession and discipline experience. Bruce Macfarlane and Lesley Gurlay (2009) invoke a "'hidden curriculum' of emotional performativity" in reflective writing (p.455) which requires students to humbly admit to their weaknesses, demonstrate that they have changed, and refrain from questioning current theoretically fashionable positions. For these reasons, Fendler (2003) categorizes reflective journal writing as a site of "surveillance and an exercise of pastoral power" (p.22). Discourses of reflection depend to a great extent on notions of individualism and emancipatory liberal humanism (Bleakley, 1999). Despite the fact that these notions have been deeply problematized in the "poststructuralist turn" in the social sciences in particular (Davies & Davies, 2007), Clegg (2004) argues that teachers in higher education are invited to accept them as "obvious and transparent" (p.293) when it comes to reflection.

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This paper builds on these critiques, and argues further that the effects of what I am calling “webness”, the specific qualities of meaning-making and text-making in digital environments, create additional complexities for the construction, maintenance and disclosure of a reflective self in online writing. When humanist assumptions underpin online reflective writing, implicitly or explicitly, students and teachers can find themselves in challenging and sometimes paradoxical positions. This article explores how these positions can play out, and calls for a philosophy of reflective writing that can better take account of digital contexts and practices. This philosophy draws from work being done in articulating what digital reflective writing might afford, and is rooted in theories of online and database subjectivity. One way it might be put into practice is through what I am calling “placeholder” reflection – bringing together speed, fragmentation and remixability (by which I mean the ability to recombine and recontextualize content to create new meanings or creative works) to offer students a more flexible and more digital way of constructing accounts of competence, learning and experience.

2. Reflective writing in professional disciplines

The specific context of this article is higher education in the United Kingdom, where online reflective writing is increasingly part of the landscape across a range of disciplines, but particularly in professional and vocational programmes of study (Strivens & Ward, 2010). Often reflective practices are incorporated as “high-stakes” or assessed elements of programmes in order to comply with the requirements of accrediting bodies for evidence of the development of “reflective practitioners”. Perhaps as a result of this professional focus, writing as a practice is not often foregrounded, and reflective writing in particular is seen as a transparent and stable mode of self-disclosure, rather than as a complex genre requiring sophisticated literacy practices. It is also typically the case that, before moving into online reflective environments such as blogs

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or e-portfolios, these programmes used paper-based reflection in the form of diaries, logs and portfolios. Perhaps for this reason, researchers and educators in profession-based disciplines generally seem to assume that online reflective writing is basically equivalent to its offline counterpart. Online reflective accounts are usually assumed to have a straightforward relationship with the offline selves of students. Where digital difference is acknowledged in online reflective practices, it is seen to be technological rather than conceptual, and beneficial rather than problematic (Butler, 2006, p.12). This paper positions the digital more radically, as a space in which the humanist assumptions underpinning reflective writing practices can sometimes be seen to become insufficient, or to break down.

In their analysis of the rhetorical strategies of professional development, Richard Edwards and Katherine Nicoll (2006) argue that models, theories and so-called common-sense understandings of reflection often ignore the “intertextual and interdiscursive practices that make it possible” (p.123). They object to the notion of reflection as a mirror, instead proposing to view it as a “language game” that privileges the idea of language as transparent (*ibid*). However, the implications of this way of thinking about reflective writing – as producing the history and the reality it represents – are, as Carolyn Taylor (2003) argues, rarely acknowledged (p.249). To do so would be to undermine the foundations of reflective practice, because the use of reflective writing is justified in professional higher education disciplines on the grounds that it supports students to develop themselves through authentically and coherently representing their experience. There is an often tacit assumption about the kind of self doing the reflecting: it is individual, autonomous, consistent, but most of all amenable to development and progression through effort and direction.

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This assumption underpins much of the most influential work on reflection, from John Dewey onwards. Dewey (1933) considered reflective thinking to be different from other kinds of mental processes, relying on logic, evidence, discipline and purposefulness. Through reflection, a state of doubt resolves into a settled truth or course of action (p.12). Rogers (2001) analysed seven theories of reflection (including Dewey; Schön; and Boud, Keogh and Walker) and found some commonality in terms of definitions: he maintains that there is broad agreement that reflection is a cognitive activity or process which requires the individual's active engagement to examine his or her own emotional or cognitive responses to situations or experiences (p.41). Moon (1999) identifies slightly different theoretical sources of reflective practices (primarily Dewey and Habermas, with important contributions from Schön and Kolb), and maintains that reflection is a "simple mental process" (p.93): a purposeful consideration of complex or open ended problems or ideas (p.98).

Self-knowledge, and authentic representation of self, is central to a number of important accounts of reflection that have been influential in professional education in the United Kingdom. David Boud (2001) claims that reflection on practice allows for a re-evaluation of experience to determine which thoughts and feelings resulting from it are authentic (p.14), appearing to define authenticity in the Heideggerian sense of 'ownness' or 'mineness' – an unmediated orientation to the self (Carman, 2009). Christopher Johns' (2004) work on reflection is primarily aimed at helping health professionals to be emotionally available and stable in work situations which can be harrowing and extreme. For him, self-knowledge is at the heart of this stability: "if you consider that 'who I am' is the major therapeutic tool I use in my practice, then clearly I need to know myself well in order to use myself in the best therapeutic way" (p.37). Reflection can, furthermore, be a route towards uncovering the "truth" of situations which we have distorted

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through flawed patterns of thinking (p.76). Gillie Bolton (2005) views reflection as a tool for profound self-exposure and examination: “a closely observed event... written about, reflected upon, discussed critically, and re-explored through further writings stands metonymically for the whole of that professional’s practice” (p.31). Individual change and development over time can be “kept pace with” by a reflective practice that focuses on a “practitioner’s relationship with her- or himself” (p.22). Even less obviously personal models of reflection, such as “significant event analysis” (developed from John Flanagan’s (1954) “critical incident technique”), which is commonly used in medical education, often describe their purpose as seeking “depth and breadth of reflection” (Henderson, Berlin, Freeman, & Fuller, 2002, p.121), which “hinges on honesty”, and for students to be “liberated” to explore their own experiences (p.122). And the explicitly political “critical reflection”, intended to “expose or unsettle dominant assumptions with the expressed purpose of challenging and changing dominant power relations” (Fook & Askeland, 2006, p.47), require a subject who is willing and able to challenge convention and their own comfortable truths, and to evidence progress and change (Kember, McKay, Sinclair, & Wong, 2008, p.375).

My research has found that writing online destabilizes these humanist ideals on which reflective practices are based. This research is described, and data related to online reflective writing interpreted and theorized, in what follows.

3. Research participants and methods

The research that informs this article was a qualitative study involving 20 students and 12 teachers in higher education programmes in the UK. Its methodology consisted of interviewing participants to explore how they were negotiating assessed online reflective practices. The goal

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was to get a picture of the complexity of these practices and the ways that students and teachers took up, rejected and reframed the various discourses of reflection available to them.

I write now as a teacher and a researcher in the field of digital education. At the time of the research I was a learning technologist in one of the participating programmes, and was undertaking this research as part of my doctoral study. Additional programmes were identified through a number of channels: through a general request on two relevant email lists of which I was already a member; through several key informants knowledgeable about e-portfolios who sent my request to their own networks; and through my contacts from an e-portfolio project I had previously worked on. Once programmes were identified and key people indicated a willingness to participate, programmes were selected to achieve a reasonable spread of discipline areas, level and mode of study. Programmes had also been engaged for at least a year in high-stakes online reflective writing in a higher education context, as a condition of participation. All the programmes were professional or vocational in nature, which appears to reflect the state of reflective practice at the moment in higher education, at least in the UK (Strivens et al., 2009).

I conducted 31 interviews in total (two teachers were interviewed together). Teachers were my primary point of contact, and they then put me in touch with their students, either by directly approaching particular individuals, or by sending out a request for participation to all students on my behalf. The table below provides an overview of the participants in the research, and indicates discipline, study mode and level, and digital environments in use on each programme.

Table 1: overview of research participants

Discipline	Type of programme	Interviewees	Digital environments
Architecture and	undergraduate, on	3 students	Blogs, HTML sites and

construction	campus	1 lecturer	portfolios – some public and some shared just with tutors (student's choice). Directly assessed.
Education-related	postgraduate, distance	5 students 1 lecturer	Blogs, private between each student and their tutor. Directly assessed.
Education-related	postgraduate, distance	4 students 2 tutors 1 lecturer	Blogs shared within cohort or public, e-portfolios shared selectively with tutors. Informing reflective assignments (not directly assessed).
Nursing	undergraduate, on campus	4 students 1 lecturer	E-portfolios shared selectively with tutors. Directly assessed.
Law	postgraduate, on campus	2 lecturers (jointly interviewed)	E-portfolios shared selectively with tutors and informing assessed reflective reports (not directly assessed).
Pharmacology	undergraduate, on campus	1 lecturer	E-portfolios shared selectively with tutors and informing assessed reflective reports (not directly assessed).
Social Work	undergraduate, on campus	2 students 2 lecturers	E-portfolios shared selectively with tutors. Directly assessed.
Teacher training	postgraduate, blended	2 students 1 lecturer	E-portfolios shared selectively with peers and tutors. Directly assessed.

I spoke with 14 female and 6 male students, and 9 female and 3 male teachers. The cultural backgrounds of participants was mainly English or Scottish, but I also spoke with students from Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, and the Ukraine. To protect participant anonymity, all names have been changed, and students and teachers are identified only by their level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate). In this article I focus on some common, overarching themes that emerged from my interviews, regardless of the technology, assessment rubric or even discipline in question. Specific contexts are not referred to except where necessary to interpret the data. This is not to suggest that the specifics of disciplines and online environments are irrelevant. However, the exploration of 'webness' here is meant to show how these issues emerge

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despite differences in context, where an underpinning humanist approach to reflection is allowed to go unchallenged.

A semi-structured interview format allowed for both a focus on the issues of importance to me, and a flexibility in following the interests and impressions of interviewees. I take a post-structuralist perspective on research, which means that, for me, knowledge, subjectivity and language are intimately entwined. The researcher should be wary of claiming to represent ‘the truth’ of individual experiences, because: “there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and the process of signification” (Denzin, 1989, p.14). This becomes particularly apparent when discussing the thematic analysis approach that I took. I understand thematic analysis as a method assemblage – John Law’s (2004) term for the ways in which we enact “presence, manifest absence, and absence as Otherness” (p.84) in our knowledge-making and research practices. For Law, method assemblages “necessarily craft complexities and simplifications”. Our methods allow us to avoid being “dazzled” by complexity, by foregrounding some things by “very selectively attending to, amplifying, and so manifesting, possible patterns” (*ibid*). My approach to thematic analysis was similar to that described by Nigel King and Christine Horrocks (2010), who define themes as: ‘recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question’ (p.150). Like Law, they stress that the researcher’s vision informs how themes are identified and developed. Themes are not “like a fossil in a rock” (*ibid*, p.149) waiting to be discovered. The successive stages of thematic analysis are, in a sense, the process of fossilising the themes that have been named. For this reason, thematic analysis is open to the same sort of scrutiny, and to questions about validity, as other analytic strategies. This is not a problem, rather it is an opportunity to ask

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those questions and to consider, as Michael Crotty (1998) puts it, what store we want others to set by our findings (p.41).

Interviewees in my study were very willing to talk about what it meant for them to engage in reflective practices online, and had quite a bit to say about how they approached their blogs or e-portfolios. Some of the questions I asked students included:

- How is it to do this writing online?
- Who is your audience for this portfolio/blog? How do you hope they will see you?
- Can you write personal things in your portfolio/blog? Have you? What happened/ would happen if you did?
- What kinds of things would you not write in your portfolio/blog?
- Who owns your portfolio/blog? Why?
- What do you think is going to happen to your portfolio/blog after this course? After you graduate? Will you continue on with your portfolio/blog? What will you use it for?
- What kind of identity did you construct (or reveal) in your portfolio/blog?

And for teachers:

- How 'real' or 'authentic' does your students' reflection seem to you?
- What kind of identities do you think students negotiate or manage when writing in this way?
- Who owns the reflective spaces students use? Why?
- What happens to the students' reflection after the course? After the students graduate?

From the answers to these questions, and other issues that emerged during the interviews, it was apparent that these online practices were complex in their relationship to disclosure, authenticity and engagement with the digital. The next section reports the key data that informs this claim.

4. Tensions emerging in online reflection – what teachers and students say

The digital nature of online reflective writing emerged as important for teachers and students in a variety of ways. Interviewees described a number of strategies for dealing with the online nature of online reflection: including denial, caution, and consent, as well as rejection.

For some, a willingness to disclose or confess in online reflective spaces was dependent on a belief in the spaces themselves as private and safe. This belief could require some deft manoeuvring. Natalie taught within a context where students were often anxious about or unfamiliar with technology, and she explained that, in her students' place, she would consciously choose not to think about her portfolio as being on the web:

Natalie (teacher, undergraduate): I would think about it in a way that I would think about word processing something.

Interviewer: Right, you don't think there's any difference between writing it in a like a Word document or something?

Natalie: [pause] I think, if it were me, that's the way I would have to think about it in the beginning, until I got used to using it.

Natalie's clarification leaves open the possibility that the online nature of the portfolio could be thought about later on, but 'getting used to' the environment will first require denial of that nature. Some students appeared to approach their reflective spaces in exactly that way, choosing trust over a critical engagement with the context of their reflective writing, even in circumstances that would seem likely to cultivate mistrust. For example, Eileen and Yvonne, students in the same cohort, each told me about a technical glitch in the privacy controls for their e-portfolio system, where reflections and uploaded evidence appeared in the wrong portfolios. Neither student expressed much worry about potential implications of this glitch, though, believing the consequences to be limited, since they saw their reflective writing as being located within their university, not on the web:

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when you think about things going on the web, you think about everyone being able to see it and things. But, um, I don't know, it's just because the uni's given it us I presume it's safe and that no-one can hack into it or anything like that... I can't see it being, like, spread to the whole world. (Yvonne, undergraduate student)

Other students acknowledged the webness of their reflective spaces, but developed strategies to help them avoid losing control of their message online until they felt they had perfected it.

Because it felt risky and “live”, Lynne put off her engagement with the online reflective space so that she entered it only when she was sure of what she wanted to say:

It felt safer writing it in a Word document first... There's something about writing directly you know into an online format whatever that is more [pause] live I suppose... I need to be absolutely sure that what I'm writing is what I want to write because it might it might disappear onto the internet at any time, you know? [laugh] (Lynne, postgraduate student)

Beth had a similar fear of losing her work to the wider internet, and she gave this as the reason she would not communicate unhappiness about a course or lecturer in her (non-public) e-portfolio; because it would then be “floating around in this virtual, you know, this void somewhere [laughs]” (Beth, undergraduate student).

Megan, on the other hand, claimed to be entirely aware and accepting of the nature of the digital archive, and choosing to be there fully, with nothing to hide. Much of our interview was taken up with discussions of her various online presences, and she mentioned that she would have preferred her private course blog to be public:

There's nothing that I've expressed in any part of the course that I would mind being public. Uh, but I'm quite mouthy at work ... I don't really mind what's recorded as me having said cause it's nothing that I wouldn't say anyway. (Megan, postgraduate student)

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Megan went on to describe the possibility of being called to account for her online words, but did not experience this as inhibiting. For Megan, safety came in the confidence of the control she had over her digital persona.

Esther Dyson (1998) predicted well over a decade ago that being online would reconfigure what privacy and display mean, and how they were experienced, concluding that “everyone has personal preferences for privacy, but they are influenced by the surrounding culture and by the surrounding economy” (p.275). Work on youth social media practices indicates that privacy remains important, but that it now denotes the ability to “limit access through social conventions” (d. boyd, 2008, p.131). Here, tactics such as “security through obscurity” replace structural boundaries (p.133), making people more vulnerable to changes in the way archives are constructed and surfaced, because: “privacy is a sense of control over information, the context where sharing takes place, and the audience who can gain access” (d. boyd, 2006, p.18).

Web users have become more aware in recent years of the ways in which changes to context can affect them, and those students and teachers who had concerns about who may have been watching, and how much disclosure was too much, sometimes reacted by rejecting the notion of putting something personal or controversial in their reflective space in the first place, or of allowing or encouraging students to do so. Sam, a teacher whose students had the option (but were not required) to create their portfolios in the open web, actively discouraged disclosure of what she called the “darker parts” of themselves: “they have to have confidence that [pause] what they put in those portfolios is confidential. Unless they choose to publish it. And I try to discourage publication of the darker parts” (Sam, teacher, undergraduate). In addition, she described the risk of exposure online, whether emotional or in terms of identity disclosure, as

one that could be entered into without students' realisation, and took great care to monitor her students' digital output:

I had a guy come to see me yesterday with a [public web] portfolio... and I just said to him 'look, you've given up enough information here if someone really wants to, to claim your identity' and he said to me 'what do you mean?' and I said 'name, address, date of birth, family name' and he went 'oooh my god' and [I] said 'so can you take that down off your [portfolio] now, can you sort it out', and ...it was 'no no you'll mark me down' and I said 'no I won't. I won't mark you down.' (Sam, teacher, undergraduate)

Although Sam believed she conveyed her concerns about privacy to her students, the student she discusses here was under the impression that he was required to make these disclosures, and feared being penalised when it came to assessment if he did not.

Bob, a teacher whose postgraduate students undertook professional placements as part of their studies, told me that students understood the concept of confidentiality and anonymizing information they put in their online reflections, but had to be 'policed' to ensure they adhered to the guidelines:

While they're out on placement, we actively encourage them to talk about different aspects of their placement. Now, if they're not getting on with their [placement colleagues], whilst they're out on placement, and they start to decry [a colleague], or, for that matter, they start to, to be too critical, in relation to the [organization], then we, we try to step in... In other words, anonymity is, is asked for in that kind of situation. But... it's inevitable sometimes that, they don't adhere to that, so it does have to be policed. (Bob, teacher, postgraduate)

Bob described anonymity in a way that seems to mean more than simply removing identifying details; students were stopped from expressing negative views about their placements or colleagues. In the context of his programme, this likely relates to the fact that students used their portfolios later for professional validation, and their reflections may easily have been linked with their placement records. The potential use of reflective data to make negative professional

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judgments about students was one that Bob, as a teacher, believed he had a responsibility to shield students from.

The students that Sam and Bob describe are not, in my view, simply misunderstanding what is required. They are, instead, caught up in the complex, and perhaps sometimes contradictory, attitudes towards online reflective writing that teachers communicate to them. The line between what is desired by teachers, and what is forbidden, is fuzzy. Students must “talk about different aspects of their placement”, but not “be too critical”. They must not publish “the darker parts”, but they are assessed on their written reflections. The culture of online reflection is one of policed boundaries, drawn and redrawn to attempt to keep control in a context where the leakage, recontextualization or misuse of data is a looming threat.

Indeed, some teachers and students believed that the consequences of disclosure could be grave. Jess, another teacher, talked about being alarmed by a story she heard from a student, and used the rhetoric of “big brother” to explain her concerns:

I did have a student who, um, quite, quite scared me actually, in a way, because she was saying that, um, she didn't, um, wish to actually be involved in the [private] course blog ... because she was aware that her employers had googled her previously... And I thought 'Oh wow, big brother watching you, sort of thing' and that's quite extensive. But, you know, given all this stuff about, you know, what the government is doing about tracking our telephone calls and emails and all this sort of stuff, I mean, it makes you think doesn't it? (Jess, teacher, postgraduate)

Teachers can be in a difficult position: bringing up their concerns too explicitly or too often could damage students' confidence in their reflective spaces, or the important relationship of trust between students and teachers (J. Elizabeth Clark (2010) describes beautifully what this tension feels like for teachers, and how it can play out (p.31)). To get the results they wanted from online reflective writing, teachers needed to make students feel safe, and sometimes this

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meant downplaying thorny issues that come with doing this work online (as we saw Natalie do when she suggested students should think of their online reflection as being offline). Perhaps partly for this reason, some teachers prioritised reassuring students over engaging deeply with issues of concern:

Students raised [privacy concerns] quite a lot about their portfolio. And, at the beginning, I mean, you had to reassure them that nobody else had access to your portfolio, um, your portfolio repository I'm talking about. What they then compile out of it for presentation is up to them. (Ian, teacher, postgraduate)

Some students remained nervous, though, and responded by refusing to allow what they saw as personal into their online writing. In my interview with Dave, he described the profound impact that his course of study was having on him personally and professionally. When it came to his e-portfolio, however, he was reluctant to write directly about these experiences, choosing instead to code them in a way that he said he would later recognise, but that would not be obvious to anyone else. I asked why he was not more explicit about what he called “the depths of his soul”:

Because you're not quite sure who's going to be reading it, or because [pause] and what I was writing in in the blog was honest I just, you know I just wasn't going to you know go in to the depths. (Dave, student, undergraduate)

Sometimes students' views about safety and risk evolved, and they came to regret what they previously disclosed:

The first entry ...I wrote that 'I'm not quite sure that this course is really what I want to be doing' ...I felt afterwards that maybe that was being too open, I wished I hadn't written that. (Adele, student, postgraduate)

The uncertainty that students expressed about the ownership of their online reflective spaces, and the reasons they gave for this, are highly relevant to an understanding of the anxieties that some experience in relation to what they can and should say in their reflective writing. Rachel

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(undergraduate student), whose programme used an e-portfolio tool called PebblePad, explained the stages she went through in considering the question of ownership. She described the content of the portfolio as “all my work”, so she therefore “used to think” she owned her portfolio space, but she came to believe that it was not the only factor at play. She suggested that the Pebblepad company “really” owned it, because they would charge her for continued access to it once she graduated. She knew she could print or download the content of the portfolio, but was not so sure what would happen to the web-based version should she choose not to pay. She assumed that PebblePad would either delete it or continue to store it securely, perhaps also giving a copy to her University. She thought that the University’s stake in portfolios created under their auspices might mean they had a right to a copy, perhaps including content that she created but did not initially share.

Lynne’s initial response to who owned her blog was so definite that I moved on quite quickly to a follow up question. She interrupted me to modify her initial certainty, though:

Interviewer: Who, who do you feel owns your blog?

Lynne (postgraduate student): [pause] I feel that I own it. Yeah. Definitely, yeah.

Interviewer: And, um, what do you expect to...

Lynne: I suppose I feel that I own it but I don’t, I don’t feel that I own the you know [laughingly] the technology that publishes it. ...because it’s sitting on um [the web site], I suppose I feel I I own it but I’ve um, I’ve given some permissions away.

Finally, Mona turned the question back on me, rather anxiously:

Interviewer: After you finish this year ...what do you think is going to happen to your portfolio?

Mona (postgraduate student): Oh, I don’t know, actually, I never thought of that. I hope they hide it carefully, but... probably not! Uh, do you know what happens? I don’t know.

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This section has illustrated the extent to which the digital context matters when reflective writing moves online, and the tensions that emerge when teachers and students try to operationalize humanist notions of reflective practice without considering how these are challenged in this space. While teachers and students work to create boundaries that make their online practices feel safe, such safety is illusory if it is not grounded in an understanding of what it means to write online – particularly how the digital may heighten issues around audience, identity and disclosure. I move on now to suggest one possible grounding for this understanding, based on theories of online subjectivity and the database, and then applying these to the concept of “placeholder reflection”.

5. Theorising online reflective writing: subjectivity and the database

Online writing has implications for the notions, important in many pedagogies of reflection, of authenticity and coherence. Even where the writing itself appears linear, personal and closed to destabilizing authorship practices such as hyperlinking (Landow, 2006), every time we act online, something is left behind that is us, but not us – a trace. Database structures, the technical underpinnings of online services and applications, including blogs and e-portfolios, produce and work with traces through categorisation, identification, sorting, storage and reconfigurability. Mark Poster (1996) claimed that databases are forms of discourse (p.278), “inscribing symbolic traces” (p.283) and constituting the subject as highly unstable:

Through the database alone, the subject has been multiplied and decentred, capable of being acted upon by computers at many social locations without the least awareness by the individual concerned yet just as surely as if the individual were present somehow inside the computer. (p.286)

This constitution is “a complex configuration of unconsciousness, indirection, automation, and absent-mindedness” (p.288). Neither the creator of the database (e-portfolio, blog software,

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search engine) nor the individual represented in it are fully in control of what happens in the database. These are representations that are out-of-control; in other words, not representations at all, but versions. The issue of control is particularly relevant to teachers and students, as we have seen. The context of a reflective blog or e-portfolio entry, like all web-based data, is always provisional, held together by the design of the database, which might, at some point, be redesigned and content recontextualized by being moved, deleted, corrupted, or surfaced or combined in new ways. The rules can change, in other words, long after the game has been played. Students and teachers appear to recognise this, at some level, but to have little support – pedagogical or theoretical – for working with it.

Furthermore, if the digital reflective self (or fragments of this self) generated in an online environment is always able to become something other than what the student may have intended, questions about authenticity take on an urgent new dimension, and we must consider what exactly we are compelling, and assessing. We require a theory of ‘traces’ that leaves space for creative possibility – the possibility of a trace as a marker of what has never been – the non-origin, in Jacques Derrida’s terms. For Derrida (1997), the trace as non-origin is the impossibility of ever grasping an ‘original’ sense of things: “the trace is not only the disappearance of origin... it means that the origin did not ever disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which then becomes the origin of the origin” (p.61). There is no essence or ‘reality’ that is “not already ...the trace of a trace” (Riddel, 1976, p.586). As Peter Sedgwick (2001) says, Derrida’s trace is “the very process of signification”, and that it “indicates a fundamental possibility of repetition... that is inherent in the production of meaning” (p.207). To suggest that there is no “origin” in reflective writing is to undermine the humanist project of reflection, and yet our digital contexts of self-representation seem to highlight that the “origin”

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from which reflective writing flows is not a student's "authentic self", but a complex and shifting assemblage of people, practices and technologies.

Derrida's (1995) essay about the archive offers clues to the way the trace functions in a digital context. He suggested that "archival technology" determines not only the way in which events and data are *recorded*, but the way in which they are *produced*: "what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way" (p.18). This has implications not only for data, but also for the subject. Poster (2001) claimed that the concept of identity, with its focus on consciousness situated in a body, is useful for exploring political resistance, but that a model of "language/media assemblages" is necessary for thinking about the mutable nature of online subjectivity (p.8). He called the online domain a "new speech situation" (2006, p.156) requiring new understandings of the partiality of identities (p.157). The combination of fragmentation and persistence of the database suggests a radically altered subjectivity. This sense of the difference of the digital was expressed by many of the interviewees cited above, and it made a difference to the ways in which they were prepared to imagine and engage in their reflective writing online.

The "self" is destabilized by digital representations, and yet the archived internet, built on databases, constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which we may have little control: "we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us" (Simon, 2005, p.16). Each databased self is a textual self that can be replicated, divided, remixed and radically recontextualized: "digital archives allow situational context to collapse with ease. ...search engines can collapse any data at any period of time" (d. boyd, 2001, p.33). Poster (1996) put it starkly: "the database is perfectly transferable in space, indefinitely preservable in time; it may last forever everywhere" (p.284). In educational contexts, as Ray Land and Siân Bayne (2002, online) have argued in relation to virtual learning environments, such "archival fixity and

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retrievability” binds students to the words and actions of their online past. Miles Kimball (2005) considered this to be potentially antithetical to the pedagogies that underpin much reflective practice, discouraging students from taking risks, experimenting, or expressing uncertainty (p.454) – and this did appear to be the effect for students like Lynne and Adele. Students were often aware of the implications of doing personal work in a digital space, and made conscious efforts to either ignore possible danger, or address it by refusing to disclose or by rehearsing their narratives offline to perfect them before entrusting them to the permanence of the web.

On the other hand, if there is no origin, no original source of meaning, as Derrida claimed, perhaps the database offers the possibility of a meaning making and a pedagogy, including one of assessment, that does not fear a loss of control but instead celebrates mystery, disaggregation and replication. The conclusion of this paper proposes the “placeholder” as a pedagogical move towards such a possibility.

6. Digital futures for reflective writing: the placeholder

If online reflective writing cannot straightforwardly be “an expression of a subject” (Poster, 1996, p.280), what is it about, and for? Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004) has pointed out that:

Making sense of ...representation of student work requires multiple contexts, fluidity, plurality. Or: in a postmodern world, what in earlier times might have been regarded as fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity are understood today as necessary virtues. (pp.739-40)

She asks us to acknowledge the “multiple contexts” from which student writing emerges (p.741). Taking that urging seriously, what if online reflective practices were deliberately designed to deal in fragments; not as revelations from an authentic, coherent self, but in their own right, as

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objects whose origins are less important than their capacity to be stored, remixed and worked with?

The notion of fragmented reflection is an idea which has been proposed elsewhere, in Darren Cambridge's important work on e-portfolios (2009, 2010), in the context of the "networked self". However, the "networked self" metaphor has not broken away from the humanist philosophies of reflection that have informed so much reflective writing pedagogy, and which I have shown in this article to be problematic in the context of online reflection.

Cambridge describes two "selves" – the "networked self" and the "symphonic self" (2009). The networked self is fast, fluid, and takes pleasure in "flexibility and agility" (2009, p.42). Its goal is to "cultivate connections". Importantly – and here we return to the notion of purposefulness so central to the humanist philosophy of reflective practice – it does this cultivating and connecting *intentionally* (*ibid*), with particular, short-term, goals in mind. There is longer-term value, also:

Through collection of diverse artifacts of learning and performance and many acts of reflective dialogue with them over time, meaningful connections accumulate and compound... Each new activity and new connection is an opportunity to add, adjust and remix. (p.45)

This compounding is not deliberate, but "aggregate", a function of time and multiple acts of reflective dialogue with these fragmented connections, not through the secure human mind at work. This is a crucial point, which I will take up later in my proposal of the "placeholder" as a useful metaphor for reflection.

The symphonic self is framed in contrast, and does exactly the sort of forceful, deliberate work that the networked self cannot accomplish. It "stresses integrity and continuity" (p.42), and "it

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moves beyond aggregation toward integration and synthesis” (p.45). Furthermore, “connections are valued not just for their immediate impact but for their coherence with a long-term narrative of how a person’s actions in multiple spheres add up to a whole that embodies enduring values” (p.42). Cambridge does not claim fixity for this symphonic self, but rather an iterative coherence. Each representation or performance of the symphonic self is temporary, but it always articulates a stable identity and set of values: “this is who I am, what I have done, what I stand for, and the basis on which I choose to act going forward” (p.45).

As Cambridge rightly points out, the symphonic self “embodies the values of humanism in its focus on the whole person” (p.43). However, the networked self also embodies these values, in its insistence on deliberation and purposefulness – on a “self” which chooses freely amongst options, which is an “unconstrained author of meaning and action” (Belsey, 1985, p.8).

A crucial issue with the metaphors of the “networked self” and the “symphonic self” is raised by Julie Hughes (2009). She warns that “we must take care to avoid binaristic readings of eportfolio learning that privilege the symphonic self unproblematically and move beyond humanist ideals/discourses” (p.51). Her warning would seem to be justified by the way these metaphors are being taken up by other writers. For example, Tracy Penny Light, Bob Sproule and Katherine Lithgow (2009) suggest that their goal is to foster the symphonic self, because “we want students to develop their “whole person” rather than learn only to make strategic connections” (p.78).

Indeed, while Cambridge himself values both of these “selves”, he turns to the symphonic when it comes to summing up the purpose and value of reflection – the point is to “reflect on what each piece means and how it relates to other items, the eportfolio as a whole, and the author’s

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identity...” (2010, p.199). Reflection, in other words, is ultimately in service of integrated identity work.

There are more nuanced ways of seeing the symphonic self, as Hughes points out: “symphony includes, in addition to coherence, a provision for the performance of discordant selves, both individual and communal, the orchestration of which changes over time” (p.52). However, because of the underpinning humanist philosophy of these metaphors of selfhood, and of the idea of reflection that informs them, I believe there is a limit to how helpful they can be in taking account of the problems of subjectivity that working online brings to the surface. Critiques of humanist subjectivity in both the literature on reflection and on online subjectivity show that self-representation is unstable at best, and is the result not of the authentic essence of the writer, but of relations of power, discourse and subjectivity that constitute online reflection and writing.

My vision of a digital future for reflection involves the concept of the “placeholder”. I propose the placeholder as a taggable, searchable, remixable fragment of content. Its origin may be a moment of deliberate connection-making, but it may also come from a whole range of different sources or impulses, including accident, aesthetic appeal, perplexity, algorithmic coincidence, or what students and teachers sometimes refer to as acts of “box-ticking” – trying to perform the sort of reflective self that students believe their teachers want to see (Ross, 2012a). The term placeholder came from my interview with Penny, who explained:

The reflective parts of the [assignments], they're doing it as they're doing the course and I'm not sure that that's the best point at which they should be reflecting. ...only 20 years later, have I worked out why we did certain things in a certain way for [a course I took] ... when you're reflecting as you're doing a course, for example, you're having a learning experience, you're [pause] kind of putting in a placeholder. (Penny, teacher, postgraduate)

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Reflection, if viewed as a series of standalone fragments of content that function across and through time, could support rather than work against the theory of digital subjectivity described in the last section. Placeholders may evoke complex practices and preoccupations, but each placeholder stands as an expression of a moment. It may be text, image, sound, or a mixture of these. It has value in itself as an aesthetic object, and it can also be combined and recombined (remixed) with other placeholders at any time to create a *spectacle* of reflection (Ross, 2012b). The placeholder is not intended to tell a story of development, personal growth or change. A bricolage or remix process may sometimes produce such a story, as students choose from amongst the content in their reflective environment to produce a particular effect, but each remix is merely one of many possible ways in which placeholders may be configured, including by, or with, non-human actors in a kind of “gathering” (Edwards, 2010). For Edwards, an energising vision of education is one of “responsible experimental gatherings of things that matter” (2010, p.15). Placeholder reflection is experimental, provisional and oriented to the moment – either the moment of creation of the placeholder, or the moment of remixing. It may be possible for an author, a teacher or a stranger to see traces of ‘self’ in a placeholder, but the traces are all that exist: there is no original. The original is recreated anew each time a set of placeholders is combined – through deliberate selection and display, through the workings of a search engine or serendipitous collection of fragments.

Two digital forms of what “placeholder reflection” could look like are the tag cloud, and the lifestream.

The tag cloud

Tags are keywords that describe the content of the link being bookmarked. A single tag is emblematic of brevity, surface and speed. It can represent the content it tags in only a superficial

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way. However, taken together, and turned into hyperlinks, tags become an evolving and complex “gathering” (Edwards, 2010) of subject and object. Tom Ewing (2010, online) has described “hashtags” (the form of hyperlinked tags used on Twitter) as “secret doors”, “time machines” and “collisions”. A tag cloud, or collection of tags, is automatically generated by many social web platforms to represent the content on the platform. In educational use, they can function as remix-agents for an individual, a class or even a whole programme.

The result of clicking any tag within the cloud is a remix of placeholders. The remix has not been deliberately created, but it reflects something that might be relevant or interesting to me now. It might spark new ideas or connections. Tags are not really about completion or the past. Rather, they are agents of the present, insistently drawing the past out of itself and presenting it anew. They take us “from one place to another without traversing time”, and for Jean Baudrillard (1994) this is the true pleasure of speed:

What does speed itself mean to us if not the fact of going from one place to another without traversing time, from one moment to another without passing via duration and movement? Speed is marvellous: time alone is wearisome. (p.70)

A collapse of time, or what Bayne (2010) called “the problematising of the ‘natural’ relation between past and present”, can contribute to an uncanny and posthumanist approach to learning that:

works with the idea of the learning process as volatile, disorienting and invigorating, and it also stretches conventional assessment frameworks to their limits. In defamiliarising the familiar through creative pedagogical appropriation of the digital, teaching becomes newly, and productively, strange. (p.10)

Here, access is privileged over context, which is another way of saying that context is continually represented, made part of the present moment. Each time I reuse a tag – knowingly

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or unknowingly – I am producing a link, a wormhole between my experiences and present and someone else's (which might be a past self). The tag is in this sense the ultimate reflective practice, as it makes the past newly generative each time it is used. Showing students how to tag the content they create or curate in a digital space is therefore a method by which to encourage a different mode of reflection: one that is instantly accessible through time and context, and available for reuse or remixing.

The lifestream

A lifestream is a collection of web content, which could include tweets, blog posts, commentary on other blog postings, bookmarks, images, audio and video content, and any other source with an RSS feed. Once feeds are set up, the lifestream software automatically generates a stream of this content, organized reverse-chronologically, and updated every time a new object or item of content is added to any of these feeds, anywhere on the web. The lifestream is constructed/constructs itself over time, and can be used as the focus of analysis or review at regular intervals, creating a *spectacle* of coherence that is a site of interest and surprise for the reviewer, who may be able to narrate patterns in their activity now that did not exist (or appear to be important) at the time the events took place.

A student on a course that I teach on the MSc in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh, which assessed a lifestream as half of the final mark, explained at the end of the course why the lifestream was not of the past:

Comments I made, notes to myself at the beginning, are far enough from me now in time that I can look and be inspired anew, or reminded of things I thought I would do and have forgotten – or haven't started yet. This isn't the past, it's a guide for the future, for me anyway. (S. Boyd, 2010), [link to lifestream](#)

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Marvellous digital speed and fragmentation brings the past into the present, where it can be taken up and made anew, and postmodern educational theory provides us with a model for this way of thinking about fragmentation and multiplicity.

Practices that foreground reconfigurability and remixability are central to digital culture (Deuze, 2006, p.66), and remix represents a fruitful lens through which to consider creativity: “regardless of context – be it literary text or commonplace book or audio performance – [remix] is identified as a means of invention and a source of creativity” (Yancey, 2009, p.6). More creative and fragmented modes of representation could give students new ways of understanding the academic and professional identities they are (re)producing. Remix shakes things up, and offers new perspectives, and it is here that its value for reflective practices may be most apparent:

Representing material in a kaleidoscope fashion ...affords ambiguity in a positive sense. Fracture and vignette allow sorting and resorting (or remixing). They can help resist ordinality, a given hierarchy of things. Thus, they avoid teleology (looking at the end of the story). (Bowker & Star, 2007, p.279)

In proposing an alternative way of thinking about online reflection, the ‘placeholder’, I aim to generate discussion which provide insight into engaging philosophical questions around reflective pedagogies, but also to offer a possible strategy for implementing practices more appropriate to digital ways of working. However, placeholder reflection will require digital literacies on the part of teachers and students which may not come naturally – practices of tagging, for instance, are not instinctive and will need to be taught and supported. This is, therefore, also part of a broader call being made by educators across many disciplines to keep pushing at our understandings of digital texts and authorship, to ensure that we and our students can be producers and critics, as well as consumers, of digital texts and digital modes of meaning-making and self-representation.

This article has been a call to educators and researchers to examine humanist philosophies of reflection that have served to mask the complexity of reflective writing and the tensions between audience, disclosure, coherence and authenticity that make this a challenging genre of writing for students to negotiate, even without a digital component. When reflective writing is required in online environments, these tensions produce a range of strategies and responses that may not be supporting the sorts of experiences we want students to have as they develop as writers and professionals. Online reflective practices that deal with complexity, fragmentation, remix and the collapse of time can provide much needed new perspectives through which to make reflective writing work more critically and creatively in higher education.

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